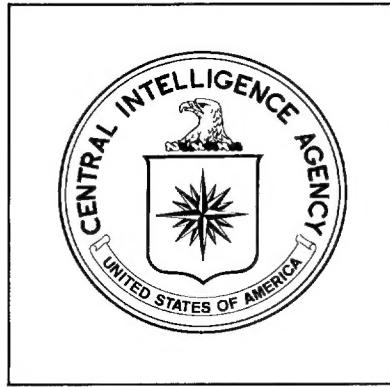


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No. 0656/75
April 15, 1975

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§ 5B (1), (2), and (3)
Automatically declassified
on: Date Impossible to Determine

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MIDDLE EAST – AFRICA – SOUTH ASIA

This publication is prepared for regional specialists in the Washington community by the Middle East - Africa Division, Office of Current Intelligence, with occasional contributions from other offices within the Directorate of Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles.

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Approved For Release 2001/07/30 : CIA-RDP79T00865A000700370001-5

Approved For Release 2001/07/30 : CIA-RDP79T00865A000700370001-5

Algeria

*Forest Barrier Planted on
Northward Path of Sahara*

The Algerians have begun a 20-year, \$2-billion project aimed at establishing a 10-mile-wide forest barrier stretching for 950 miles across Algeria from Morocco to Tunisia. Six billion seedling trees, mostly pine and eucalyptus, are to be planted in an effort to halt the northward advance of the Sahara Desert.

The encroaching desert has been causing periodic famine and migration from the area affected to Algerian cities. The ultimate objective of the project is to reclaim 70,000 square miles of barren steppe for agricultural purposes.

The "green barrier" is probably the largest forestation project for land reclamation purposes ever attempted and may well be overly ambitious for Algeria. If it works, Algeria will have taken a significant step toward achieving self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs. The country is estimated now to grow no more than 70 percent of its food needs even in good harvest years. In recent years, large food imports have been necessary to prevent starvation.

The Algerians have done considerable preparatory work, including a four-year pioneer project in desert regions. Government officials apparently appreciate the magnitude of the undertaking. They understand that finding solutions for the technical, material, financial, and human problems will take many years.

A major land reclamation program is long overdue in Algeria. Over the years erosion, deforestation in the mountains, and over-grazing on the steppes have laid waste to much of Algeria's formerly fertile land; in just one decade, Algeria lost some 750,000 acres of arable land. During French rule, nearly 5 million acres were reclaimed or otherwise improved and developed, but since independence the Algerian government has done little about the problem. (CONFIDENTIAL)

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India

Election Scheduled in Gujarat

Prime Minister Gandhi has acceded to former deputy prime minister Morarji Desai's demands for an early election in the politically turbulent state of Gujarat, which has been under direct rule from New Delhi for over a year. The uncharacteristic reversal of position by Mrs. Gandhi is likely to cause some damage to her prestige nationally.

The Gujarat poll, to be held "around June 7," will be the first major electoral test for Mrs. Gandhi's ruling Congress Party since reform leader J. P. Narayan began his anti-government campaign over a year ago. Consequently, the Prime Minister can be expected to launch an intense effort to win.

The state election will also provide a test for Narayan, who has pressed for electoral, economic, and educational reforms and an end to government corruption. After months of agitation, Narayan's ability to unite disparate opposition parties in an electoral alliance and to generate broad popular support for his movement will be on the line.

The Prime Minister's move defuses, at least temporarily, a potentially explosive situation that had been developing since the 79-year-old Desai, a native of Gujarat, began a "fast unto death" on April 7 with the avowed aim of forcing an early election. The conciliatory atmosphere will fade rapidly, however, as the election approaches.

Mrs. Gandhi had tried to avoid an early election in Gujarat because her party is weak there. She knows that national elections must be held within the next eleven months and that a defeat in Desai's home state could seriously affect party morale throughout the country.

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A number of pressures influenced the Prime Minister to change her position:

-- A real possibility for renewed violence in Gujarat as tensions stimulated by Desai's fast built up.

-- The potential for a further poisoning of the already contentious national political atmosphere if Desai were to die.

-- Strong pressure from within her party for compromise.

-- A genuine desire to preserve the life of a long-time personal associate and a major participant in India's independence struggle.

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Pakistan

Urban Protests Over Price Increases

The government last week decreed substantial increases in the prices of some subsidized commodities, specifically wheat, sugar, and edible oil. A number of labor and student groups, led by rail workers, responded with several days of protest demonstrations and strikes in Pakistan's main cities. Several persons were killed in clashes between demonstrators and police.

Even before the recent price increases, Pakistan's urban middle and working classes were unhappy with the government's failure to stem inflation, which was about 25 percent last year and is currently running at 20 percent. Although the government appears able to contain disruptions from such groups, US officials in Pakistan believe persistent inflation may be costing Bhutto some of his widespread popularity.
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